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# From Russia to the UK and Back: Musical Discoveries from WWII and the Thaw

By Elena Artamonova

## Introduction

Russian music enjoyed its popularity and appreciation among British audiences throughout the twentieth century. The musical life in London during the period of World War II was infused with a good number of concert programs. They were dedicated not only to Tchaikovsky and Russian nationalist composers of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries such as Glinka, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Balakirev, Arensky, Liadov, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov and Rachmaninov but also to selective works of Soviet composers. Certainly, these performances were given exclusively by either home or foreign musicians of Western origin. However, they laid a fine foundation for an active musical interchange between musicians of both countries formed at the turn of the Khrushchev Thaw period, when the *crème de la crème* of Soviet performers stepped on British soil in the early 1950s. However, it was down to personal contacts of enthusiastic musicians, rather than only those signed on a governmental level known as the Soviet-British Cultural Agreement of 1959, for example, that did maintain the initiatives and musical collaborations. The concert activities and previously unknown correspondence of violist Vadim Borisovsky with his British colleagues, including Lionel Tertis, which started much earlier, is the best example in this regard. The analysis and discussion of these topics rely heavily on recent archival findings from Moscow and London.

## Concert Organizers of Russian Music in London

The archive of the Royal Albert Hall contains a long list of concerts in which Russian music was performed.<sup>1</sup> Its promoters were themselves great lovers of the Russian culture. Among them were such conductors as the founder of the annual series of promenade concerts, known as the Proms, Sir Henry Wood and his Proms assistant conductor Basil Cameron, as well as Sir

Adrian Boult, who at the start of his career worked for Sergei Diaghilev's ballet company and Russian born Anatole Fistoulari. There were also noted impresarios/entrepreneurs in the classical musical world, including Harold Holt, who organized performances of such celebrities as Gregor Piatigorsky, Sergei Rachmaninov and Vladimir Horowitz among others, as well as promoters Keith Douglas and Jay Pomeroy, who spent their fortune backing classical music. There were fund-raising events and concerts to support the war effort under the patronage of the Society for Cultural Relations between the British Commonwealth and the USSR founded in 1924, Mrs. Churchill's Aid to Russia Fund and The Duke of Gloucester's Red Cross, St. John Appeal, and the London Music, Art and Drama Society Ltd.

Thanks to these joint efforts, there was a series of concerts called "Slavonic Music Concerts" in September 1941–September 1942 with four concerts in total given by the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO). "Harold Holt Sunday Concert Season 1941–1942" presented an all Russian program in Concert 9 on November 29, 1942 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) under the baton of Sir Henry Wood that included Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*, Borodin's *Symphony No. 2, The Firebird* by Stravinsky and the first movement of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7*. A concert called "A Tribute to Rachmaninov" in June 1943 was presented by the LSO conducted by Sir Henry Wood and Keith Douglas with the Russian-born pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch as a soloist performing Rachmaninov's *Piano Concertos No. 2 and No. 3* as well as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

## "Festival of Russian Music"

Eight concerts with the LSO and the Alexandra Choir conducted by Basil Cameron, John Barbirolli and

Anatole Fistoulari formed the “Festival of Russian Music” on September 19–26, 1943 (see fig. 1). Apart from well-known composers of Imperial Russia, including Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky and Scriabin, the programs presented works of the Soviet period, including music of some Soviet composers who had a very shaky position with the authorities in the USSR. Among them was *Factory-Music of Machines* (1926–28) by Alexander Mosolov, who served a prison sentence from 1937–38 for alleged counter-terrorism activities and just returned from exile in 1942. The score of *Factory-Music of Machines* was published in the USSR three times in 1929, 1931 and 1934. It was available in the West thanks to the efforts of the International Society of Contemporary Music. Highly acclaimed performances of this work took place in Berlin, Liège, Vienna, Paris, Rome and New York in the early 1930s before the Stalin purges started to sweep away all foreign contacts.<sup>2</sup> It is very likely that the London

promoters of the Festival of Russian Music simply did not know the true situation in the USSR and used their musical judgement and taste for programming of these concerts.<sup>3</sup> However, it is obvious that they did take into consideration how to please the Soviet authorities as the *Ode/Poem to Stalin (Ashik Song)*, 1936, for mixed choir and orchestra by Khachaturian was performed at the seventh festival concert on September 25. It is a musical glorification of Stalin’s personality based on rhythmic exoticism of the Caucasus and with a folksong text written by an *ashik* (a poet-minstrel/musician) named Mirza from Tovuz (Azerbaijan). All in all, it is but a modest illustration of Khachaturian’s great talent. The festival program also included musical gems of the Russian repertoire: *Firebird* by Stravinsky; Symphony No. 1 and Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and Strings by Shostakovich performed by Eileen Joyce (who toured the USSR with the LPO in 1956); and Piano Concerto No. 3 by Prokofiev performed by Noel Mewton-Wood, whose distinguishing artistic features were a remarkable technical control and beautiful cantabile tone.<sup>4</sup>

#### British Premieres of Russian Music in 1943-1944

1943 and 1944 were fruitful years for notable Russian/Soviet music premieres and fundraising events in the UK. One performance in 1943 featured Kabalevsky’s Piano Concerto with the LSO conducted by Fistoulari and Harriet Cohen<sup>5</sup> at the piano, with both performers being strong advocates for Russian/Soviet music.<sup>6</sup> The UK premiere of Shostakovich’s Sixth Symphony was performed by the LPO under Fistoulari at the London’s Adelphi Theatre on October 24, 1943.<sup>7</sup> The next day, boxing matches in aid of the National Council of Labour’s “Help for Russia Fund” took place at the Royal Albert Hall. This event was followed by a concert with an entirely English program on February 23, 1944 called the “Salute to the Red Army” in celebration of its twenty-sixth anniversary. The LSO conducted by Dr. Malcolm Sargent performed works by Handel, Elgar, Walton, Vaughan Williams, Moeran, Arnold Bax and Sir Arthur Bliss.

The Second Festival of Russian Music took place in June 1944 with seven concerts given again by the LSO, this time conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, Heathcote Statham, Albert Coates, and Anatole Fistoulari. Its artistic highlight during the Concert 5 of the Festival on June 5, 1944 was undoubtedly Piano Concerto No. 3 by Nikolai Medtner, performed by the composer, who only recently completed

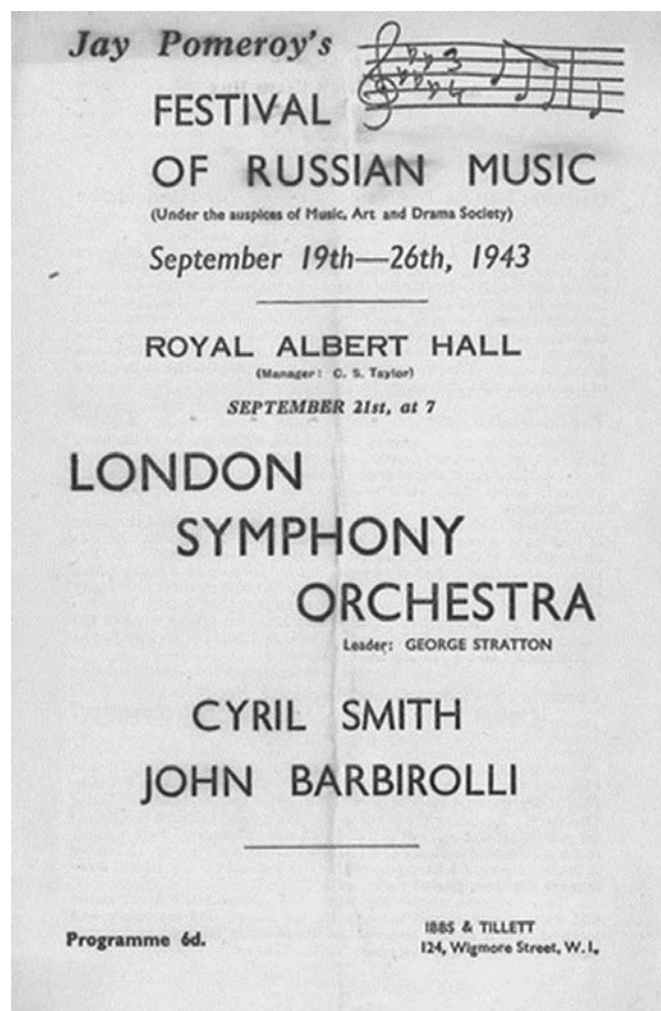


Figure 1. A program page from the “Festival of Russian Music,” September 19–26, 1943. Photo courtesy of the Royal Albert Hall, UK.

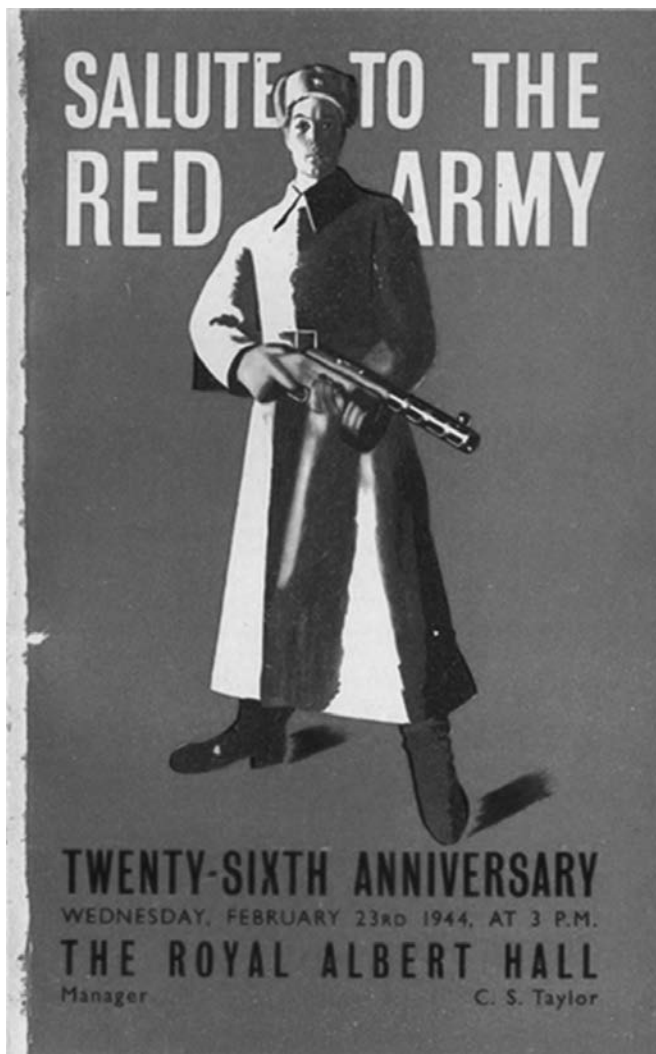


Figure 2. An advertisement from the London Symphony Orchestra's "Salute to the Red Army," February 23, 1944. Photo courtesy of the Royal Albert Hall, UK.

the work and returned to performing activities after serious health problems. This second festival also included a fine selection of works by other living composers, including Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and the UK premiers of the ballet suite *Golden Age* by Shostakovich, *Lieutenant Kije* by Prokofiev and Symphony No. 2 by Kabalevsky, for which the latter became best known in the West. It is obvious that these concert initiatives and programming were primarily of Western origin. Stravinsky and Medtner were émigrés, which in the Soviet society was a synonym to traitors. Any performance of their music along with "approved" Soviet composers Shostakovich and Prokofiev, not to mention the functionary Kabalevsky, was impossible even to imagine on Russian soil during Stalin's rule. At the same time, it was evidently acceptable abroad as a broad gesture intended to demonstrate that Russians around the globe were united in their fight against the enemy in the War.

## Russian Proms of the War Period

The Proms of the war period with the LPO, LSO, BBC Symphony Orchestras, and BBC Choral Society deserve a special mention. Between the second concert of its forty-eighth season in 1942, to the thirty-ninth concert of its fifty-first season in 1945, the Proms included fourteen concerts called "Russian Concert" and "Tchaikovsky Concert," named after this especially beloved Russian composer among British listeners. The golden jubilee season had two concerts with Russian music in June 1944 and four in every season in July–September 1942, 1943 and 1945. It is interesting to note that the Prom 14 on July 13, 1942, the Prom 8 on June 28, 1943, and the Prom 38 on August 2, 1943 all had a joined name "Wagner-Tchaikovsky Concert," in which works by these two composers were performed. In the wartime USSR, such musical combination/grouping was unthinkable, due to the chauvinistic reception of Wagner's music by the Hitler regime.

The major event of the Proms in 1942 was the English premiere of Symphony No. 7 ("Leningrad") by Shostakovich on June 29 with the LPO conducted by Sir Henry Wood, who only eight days earlier, on June 22, 1942 gave the world premiere of this symphony broadcasted from a BBC studio. A special artistic highlight of the Prom 26 on July 27, 1942 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra was the admired Piano Concerto by Khachaturian, performed by Moura Lympany, who gave its British premiere in April 1940 at the Queens Hall with the conductor Alan Bush. Other highlights apart from works by Stravinsky, Borodin, Rachmaninov, Mussorgsky, Liadov and Glinka, included Overture op. 25 by Vissarion Shebalin on July 19, 1943, Prokofiev's cantata *Alexander Nevsky*, and the English premiere of the Overture on Russian Folk Tunes by Anatoly Alexandrov on July 1, 1943. The first year of the Proms held without its founder Henry Wood, who died in 1944, included the English premiere of the *Song of Jubilation* by Alexander Veprik on September 3, 1945, Gliere's overture *The Friendship of the Peoples*, and Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony on September 13, 1945.

## Post-war Concerts of Russian Music in London

The post-war period continued explorations of Russian music mainly by the LPO, the LSO and the BBC in programs called "A Russian Programme," "Tchaikovsky



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Night,” “Tchaikovsky Concert” and “A Tribute to Rachmaninov,” and numerous occasions, when Russian/Soviet music was performed during the Proms. Undoubtedly, the highlights of the post-war English premieres of Soviet music was LSO’s performance of Shostakovich’s Ninth Symphony July 27, 1946. It was the first night of the Proms in 1946, which speaks out how significant this occasion was for the BBC, the promoter of the Proms. On February 23, 1950 the LPO conducted by Eduard Van Beinum gave the English premiere of Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 6 (in E-flat minor, op.111), which was recorded for broadcast on the BBC radio on March 1, 1950.

Thus, one may conclude that Russian music concerts in the UK during WWII and in the post-war years demonstrated the finest works of national composers of tsarist Russia. They were performed along with musical works of the Soviet period regardless of their stylistic peculiarities, traditional or unconventional and often unpredictable musical language as well as of the approved or disapproved status of their authors with the Soviet authorities. The quality and distinctiveness of music itself, as well as the finesse of musicianship, were the leading factors for English audiences and musicians in their choice of repertoire. Undoubtedly, their fair judgement, appreciation and liking for Russian music provided support and backing for British concert promoters and their high-profile patrons in their dynamic concert initiatives. One may say that this period also triggered and prepared the interest of British public to hear Soviet performers to perform the music of their motherland.

### **Delegations of Soviet Artists to the UK**

At last, an opportunity came in November–December 1952 with the concert tour called the “Delegation of Soviet Artists” to London, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh, which included the UK debut performances of the celebrated pianist Emil Gilels and the young violinist Igor Bezrodny.<sup>8</sup> This delegation was led by a special host-composer Dmitry Kabalevsky, who subsequently occupied the position of the Secretary of the Composers Union of the USSR and after 1945 was regularly entrusted by the authorities to represent Soviet musicians abroad. Gilels’s first programs in the UK consisted of works by Russian and Western classical composers, including Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin and Prokofiev, and were

designed to show his master craft as a pianist.<sup>9</sup> The need to promote Russian music was important but not pivotal as it was already a frequent and friendly guest on concert stages in the UK. The fundamental objective and accomplishment of this first tour was to lay a fine foundation for bilateral collaboration and exchange of artistic musical achievements, which opened new cultural dimensions and influenced a broader scope of audiences in both countries. It is important to note that the start of this successful collaboration did take place whilst Stalin was still in power. These musical activities flourished and accelerated year by year from the period of the Khrushchev Thaw with delegations and concert tours of British orchestras, artists, and composers to Russia and their Soviet/Russian counterparts to the UK.

The intensity of concert activities of Soviet musical royalty in the UK is impressive. Overall, Emil Gilels had over 60 performances between 1952 and October 1984, giving concerts nearly every year across the country.<sup>10</sup> In November–December 1953, Igor Oistrakh and Bella Davidovich made their English debut with the LSO conducted by Norman Del Mar in concerts organized by Victor Hochhauser, the impresario crucially responsible for many concert appearances of Soviet artists in the UK from then on. In November 1954, David Oistrakh finally gave his Royal Albert Hall debut with his pianist Vladimir Yampolski in a recital organized by the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR. Between 1954–1972, there were over 20 more concert appearances of David Oistrakh on stage of the Albert Hall.<sup>11</sup> This trip in 1954 was also the UK debut of Khachaturian as a conductor performing his Violin Concerto with David Oistrakh and the Philharmonia Orchestra. These concert tours were followed by regular performances of Rostropovich from 1956, Kirill Kondrashin from 1958, Richter from 1961 and many others. The Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra toured in Autumn 1960 and was conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky, who proved to be the most in-demand Soviet/Russian conductor in the UK for the remainder of his life.

### **Concert Tour of the LPO to the USSR**

The start of concert tours of British musicians to the post-war USSR took place slightly later, in Spring 1955, with the first small delegation of British composers and performers led by Arthur Bliss and his wife with concerts in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Kharkov. This visit was

issued and approved by high officials in both countries in recognition of the value of bilateral cultural exchange.<sup>12</sup> The following year was the peak point in exchange visits of the highest calibre. It started with the state visit of Khrushchev to London in April 1956, the first Soviet leader to visit the UK since the foundation of the Soviet Russia. Between September 20–October 2, the LPO and conductors Sir Adrian Boult, Anatole Fistoulari and George Hurst became the first British orchestra to tour the USSR, whilst the Bolshoi Theatre had its first tour since 1914 in Covent Garden. The program of the LPO's nine concerts in Moscow and four in Leningrad was very much focused on British music. Maurice Pepper, the principal second violin, left the following recollections of this trip:

The Russians had insisted that what they wanted most to hear was the music of British composers, and the problem of drawing up programmes proved a neat exercise in musical diplomacy as far as living composers are concerned. The Russians knew little if anything of Elgar or Holst. We therefore included Elgar's Violin Concerto and *The Planets* suite of Holst. From contemporary work we selected Walton's Symphony and Violin Concerto, the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies of Vaughan Williams, Britten's *Peter Grimes* suite, Alan Rawsthorne's *Symphonic Studies*, Arnold Bax's *Overture to a Picaresque Comedy* and Malcolm Arnold's Second Symphony. To this repertoire we added Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1, Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, Mozart's Haffner Symphony and Schubert's Symphony No. 9.<sup>13</sup>

Mr. Pepper was slightly exaggerating. Elgar's Violin Concerto, for example, was known in the USSR.<sup>14</sup> However, there is no doubt that the chosen program was of great interest to the Soviet audience. The debut of the LPO at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire was recorded and received the most enthusiastic long ovation that the orchestra had ever known.<sup>15</sup> The soloists on this tour were Alfredo Campoli and Moura Lympany.

## Vadim Borisovsky and English Music

This tour of the LPO was followed by the concerts of Sir Malcolm Sargent in the USSR in 1957, the tour of the BBC Symphony with Pierre Boulez in 1967 and the LSO in 1971 for the Festival of British Music. However, it was down to personal contacts of musicians, rather than only those signed on a governmental level known as the Soviet-British Cultural Agreement of 1959, for example, that maintained the initiatives and musical collaborations. In Autumn 1962, the young guitarist John Williams toured the USSR. In a letter, dated November 29, 1962, he wrote the following to Vadim Borisovsky, the prominent Russian violist and founder of the first viola solo faculty at the Moscow Conservatoire:

Dear Mr. Borisovsky, It was a great pleasure to meet you when I was in Moscow and to talk to you about various musical subjects. [ . . . ] I wrote to Maestro Segovia the other day and sent him your best wishes. [ . . . ] I am looking forward to my next visit to the Soviet Union and hope that we may meet again and perhaps play some chamber music!<sup>16</sup>



Figure 3. A concert advertisement of the “Viola-Abend of Vadim Borisovsky with Professor Konstantin Igumnov, piano,” October 22, 1922, at the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire. Works on the program included Cecil Forsyth's Viola Concerto, Alexander Winkler's Sonata, and 3 Preludes and Sonata by Vladimir Kriukov. Image courtesy of the State Central Archive of Moscow, Russia.<sup>17</sup>

There were other occasions of correspondence between Soviet and British musicians. It is a subject for further research, but a letter dated March 15, 1945 written from Surrey by Lionel Tertis, the prominent British viola player, to his counterpart Vadim Borisovsky in Moscow did find its addressee. One can hardly imagine not only how this letter was delivered without much trouble to Borisovsky at the time of the war, but also how Borisovsky managed to send some Russian music to England in the first place, as this letter of Tertis was sent in return for musical scores he got from Borisovsky. Tertis does not specify the music he received, but very likely these were Borisovsky's viola arrangements:

Dear Mr Borisovsky, Thank you very much for the Russian music you have so kindly sent to me. I enclose the only piece of Schubert I have arranged and also a Handel Sonata, which I hope you will like. I wish you could influence Shostakovich to write a work for viola and orchestra—it would be an immense help to viola players in the World. With kindest regards. Yours sincerely, Lionel Tertis.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, Borisovsky failed in getting a viola concerto from Shostakovich, but he certainly knew of viola works by York Bowen, Gordon Jacob, Alan Bush, Thomas Dunhill and other British composers that he received from the J. Curwen & Sons Publishers (now imprint of Music Sales Ltd.), with whom he was in correspondence in the early 1960s. His concert repertoire included Cecil Forsyth's Viola Concerto, which he performed in October 1922 at the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, then in March 1941 and in August 1942 on the same stage. Whereas for British audiences, this concerto was practically unknown until its recent revival. Borisovsky was a pioneer of English viola music in the USSR and gave the first USSR performance of Bax's Sonata in G in April 1923, Bowen's First Viola Sonata, and Bloch's Suite.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

One may conclude that the input of enthusiastic individuals from Great Britain and Russia was the driving force behind the perpetual interest in musical cultures of both countries. They tirelessly gave their energy, vivacity, admiration and expertise regardless of the opposing political systems as well as historical times of triumph

and turbulence/struggles. The state support and high-profile patronage certainly gave these collaborations a more stable platform and closer partnership, allowing it to flourish and bring new dimensions for understanding between our people and cultures. The latter in their turn provide the fruitful line of succession from the past to future generations to encourage and enhance traditional and unconventional music, and bring in new artistic experiments, vigour, and visions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://catalogue.royalalberthall.com> (accessed 1 June, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> A.V. Mosolov, *Stat'i i vospominaniia* [Articles and Memoirs]. Ed. Inna Barsova. Moscow: (Sovetskii kompozitor, 1986), 15, 129. All quotations from Russian sources and publications used in this article have been translated by the author, Elena Artamonova.

<sup>3</sup> Boris Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917–1981*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> *A Symphony* by Vissarion Shebalin (with no number of the symphony stated; Shebalin was the author of four symphonies by then) was also in the program of the second concert of the festival on September 20, 1943 as well as the broadly known *Festive Overture* (1937) by Nikolai Budashkin.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen's ancestors fled the Imperial Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century. Cohen toured Moscow and Leningrad in spring 1935, which made a special impact on her concert activities in pioneering Soviet music in the West. Cohen, well-known for her strong devotion to British piano music, performed works by Bliss, Bax, Ireland and Vaughan Williams, but also little-known abroad *Preludes* by Shostakovich,

- works by Kabalevsky and Polovinkin among others, becoming the first foreign musician to perform them.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Morrison, *Orchestra. The LSO: A Century of Triumph and Turbulence*. London: (Faber and Faber, 2004), 266.
  - <sup>7</sup> A month later this symphony was performed again by the same performers at the Royal Albert Hall on 27 November 1943 in the 'Concert of Russian Music' at the request of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR.
  - <sup>8</sup> There was a certain intrigue regarding the choice of Bezrodny to represent the Soviet school of violin performance. The 22-year-old Bezrodny was very talented but still young, only at the very start of his career. The leading violinist of the USSR at the time, David Oistrakh, made his UK debut two years later. Among the first Soviet artists to give concerts in the UK was the soprano Nadezhda Kazantseva, who gave her British debut at the Royal Festival Hall in February 1951, which received a standing ovation from the audience. Kazantseva travelled to the UK at the invitation of the Anglo-Soviet Friendship Society. Sergei Yakovenko 'I dovelos', i poschastlivilos'...' [It Happened to Me and I Got Lucky...] (Moscow: Kompozitor, 2007), 308–309.
  - <sup>9</sup> [www.archiv.emilgilelsfoundation.net/konzerte/](http://www.archiv.emilgilelsfoundation.net/konzerte/) (accessed 1 June, 2020).
  - <sup>10</sup> There were three relatively long gaps in Gilels's British concert tours between 1952–57, 1959–65 and 1972–76.
  - <sup>11</sup> Perhaps, the best-known event was the joint concert with Yehudi Menuhin, David and Igor Oistrakh with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Kirill Kondrashin on September 28, 1963, which was recorded. See in: BBC Legends - Exclusive Archive Recording Label: Vivaldi Triple Violin Concerto Etc. In BBC Music Magazine, BBC MM99 magazine, Vol. 9, No 3, November 2000, compact disk.
  - <sup>12</sup> Cameron Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*. Woodbridge: (The Boydell Press, 2016), 143–145.
  - <sup>13</sup> Maurice Pepper, "The London Philharmonic Orchestra in Russia." *The Musical Times*. Vol. 98, No. 1368 (Feb. 1957), 67–69. Edmund Pirouet, *Heard Melodies are Sweet: A History of the London Philharmonic Orchestra*. Book Guild, 1998.
  - <sup>14</sup> Yehudi Menuhin (an American citizen at the time) had his first concert tour to the USSR after the war in November 1945. He brought music scores of violin concertos by Elgar and Bartók, which were as it turned
  - out already known in the USSR by the means of the BBC, but the scores were unobtainable. Yehudi Menuhin *Unfinished Journey*. London: (Methuen, 1996), 196.
  - <sup>15</sup> Great Artists in the Moscow Conservatoire. London Philharmonic Orchestra, conductors Anatole Fistoulari and Sir Adrian Boult. ID: SMCCD0041 (EAN: 0000126000410). Compact disc, 2011.
  - <sup>16</sup> John Williams, *Letter to Borisovsky*. Housed in the State Central Archive of Moscow, fund L-246, op. 1, ed. khr. 160, p. 12. Quoted with the permission of Sir John Williams.
  - <sup>17</sup> The State Central Archive of Moscow, Fund L-246, op. 1, ed. khr. 228, p. 1.
  - <sup>18</sup> Lionel Tertis, *Letter to Borisovsky*. Housed in the State Central Archive of Moscow, fund L-246, op. 1, ed. khr. 160, p. 5.
  - <sup>19</sup> Kenneth Robertson, *Letters to Borisovsky*. Housed in the State Central Archive of Moscow, fund L-246, op. 1, ed. khr. 160, pp. 3–4, 9–10. Programmy kontsertov s uchastiem Borisovskogo [Concert Programmes, in which Borisovsky Took Part], fund L-246, op. 1, ed.khr. 229, pp. 1, 53, 56. Borisovsky, *Repertuarnye spiski vystuplenii* [Lists of Performed Repertoire], fund L-246, op. 1, ed.khr. 269, p. 13.